



ALGORHYTHM



Youth Leadership Institute

EVALUATION REPORT



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INTRODUCTION

The Youth Leadership Institute (YLI) is a convening of youth leaders, youth organizers, adult allies, and educators from across New England whose shared vision of education equity is grounded in a model that places students at the center of their own learning. YLI attendees come together annually to build understanding and support for youth organizing around education justice, develop relationships, share learning, and plan for youth organizing work in the upcoming school year.¹ Since 2013, YLI has engaged over 1,200 participants from rural, small town, and urban sites with socioeconomic and racial diversity.



The 4 key tenets of Student-Centered Learning (SCL)

Learning is Personalized: Students learn in different ways. Individually paced, targeted learning tasks start from where the student is, formatively assess existing skills and knowledge, and address student needs and interests.

Learning is Competency-Based: Students move ahead when they have demonstrated mastery of content, not when they've reached a certain birthday or endured the required hours in a classroom.

Learning Happens Anytime, Anywhere: Learning takes place beyond the traditional school day or school year. The school's walls are permeable; learning is not restricted to the classroom.

Students Take Ownership of Their Learning: Learning engages students in their own success and incorporates their interests and skills into the learning process. Students support each other's progress and celebrate success.

Celebrating more than five years of engagement, The Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) commissioned a study to examine whether, how, and to what extent YLI has elevated and amplified youth leadership within organizations, and across schools and districts in New England. This brief also relays NMEF's evolution, as they sought to balance strategic foundation goals with their strong commitment to learning alongside youth and community members. It is a story of deepening trust and care for communities that have been marginalized and that want to advance justice and equity. This analysis reflects NMEF's culture of ongoing learning and reflection that continues to propel them along a journey toward authentic partnerships and responsive philanthropy.

Funders who receive honest feedback and share the results of that feedback pursue smarter strategies, make better grants, and build stronger relationships.²

The objective of this report is to share key lessons and ignite new conversations about building power, sharing power, and wielding power - practices shown to benefit funders who value community engagement and want deeper partnerships, as well as those who value community-centered solutions and want greater impact.² The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy reports that: "To make the world a better place, communities need to build power; funders need to share their power with these communities; and they both need to wield their power to influence relevant audiences and decision-makers."

EVALUATION APPROACH

In 2019, Algorhythm was commissioned as a third-party evaluator to study YLI and its impact. The evaluation complements Algorhythm's evaluation of NMEF's Amplifying Youth Voice and Leadership Initiative³ and their Grassroots Portfolio.⁴ Algorhythm's overarching philosophy and approach to evaluation are best characterized as participatory and focused on targeted and sustainable learning. They empower nonprofit leaders, front-line staff, and youth by equipping them with tools and learning processes that can help them effectively tell their stories with data. The core elements of any Algorhythm evaluation include deep stakeholder participation and multi-method approaches that gather data from a range of sources and perspectives. In close partnership with NMEF, Algorhythm developed the following evaluation questions:

1. How and to what extent has YLI evolved over time? What were the key drivers of this evolution?
2. How and to what extent have YLI participants continued conversations and taken action based on conversations ignited at YLI?
3. How and to what extent has participation in YLI impacted youth, adult allies, youth organizing groups, NMEF, and the climate in New England regarding youth voice and social justice?

To address these questions, a document review captured insights across the lifecycle of YLI, and 18 key informant interviews were completed with NMEF staff, CYCLE staff, facilitators, and youth and adult participants. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to provide trends in YLI over time. Qualitative data and interviews were analyzed using thematic content analysis techniques. Data from internal reports, workshop agendas, videos, interviews, and focus groups were analyzed to assure findings were based upon a holistic view and from a variety of sources.

KEY FINDINGS

The Evolution of YLI Over Time

From the beginning, NMEF valued the authentic engagement of all stakeholders and believed that shifting the mindsets of community members would ultimately create a bottom-up demand for rigorous, equitable student-centered learning (SCL). While the foundation understood the valuable role young people could play in these efforts, they were largely unprepared for how it would shape their work and shift the agenda of YLI, de-emphasizing SCL, toward questions about identity, racial equity, and rights – matters that most affect young people’s ability to access high quality, public education.

When you look at YLI content, one thing to appreciate is how the young people put the content together and that they feel that they own that content. It is one of the unique things about YLI - it is designed and delivered by young people - that is so unique.

– Youth Organizer

Mutually Supportive Strategies: YLI and NMEF grantmaking strategy

In 2013, when YLI was initially conceived, NMEF’s strategic grantmaking was focused on increasing SCL opportunities for secondary school students in New England, especially and essentially the underserved; college and career readiness, systems change, and equity. Building upon early evidence that showed some student-centered schools were “closing the opportunity gap”,⁵ NMEF believed that increasing equitable SCL opportunities for secondary school students in New England would prepare them to earn post- secondary degrees or credentials. Their initial strategy included a combination of “top down” (broad-based) work with school districts and states along with support for “bottom up” (local) pressure from community organizers to assure that all students were receiving high quality, student-centered learning.

NMEF knew that a truly grassroots effort would need to engage all types of stakeholders, especially historically marginalized young people who were least likely to experience SCL. However, most of their early grantees did not have the capacity nor the skill sets to do so effectively. Therefore, the foundation commissioned the support of four youth organizing groups (Young Voices in



Providence, Rhode Island; Youth Organizers United in Manchester, New Hampshire; Youth In Action in Providence, Rhode Island; Youth On Board in Boston, MA) that were experts in authentic youth engagement. The idea was that these NMEF grantees would be able to prepare district, school, and community leaders to effectively engage and learn from young people.

The first YLI in 2013 sought to lift up the voices of young people as key, public education stakeholders. Four school districts receiving NMEF grants sent representatives (one superintendent and three principals) from three states to attend this one-day event. These grantees from Pittsfield, New Hampshire; Portland and Sanford, Maine; and Burlington and Winooski, Vermont learned about the value of youth voice and SCL. In addition, NMEF realized how the unfettered voices of young people resulted in new ways of seeing and understanding education reform.

In 2014, NMEF's strategic planning process identified four new initiatives to explore how SCL could spread. These included:

1. Build Educator Ownership, Leadership, and Capacity;
2. Advance Quality, Rigor of SCL Practices;
3. Develop Effective District Systems Designs; and
4. Build Public Understanding and Demand.

The fourth initiative, Public Understanding and Demand (PUD), emerged as NMEF doubled down on their commitment to community participation and grassroots organizing with the goal of changing mindsets, policies, and power. To this end, NMEF created their first strategy to support youth organizing—Amplifying Student Voice and Leadership (ASVL). The goal was to amplify youth

voice, empowering them to demand high quality SCL in their schools. In addition, NMEF continued funding and working with Lead Community Partners on parent and community organizing efforts. Sometimes, these efforts overlapped in a single community.

In 2014, NMEF’s new strategy and the inclusion of ASVL grantees fundamentally influenced the second YLI. Youth from NMEF grantee organizations focused on building a safe, supportive community for youth and adult organizers and leaders to have honest dialogue across age, ethnicity, and gender. NMEF was committed to creating a space for young people to not only participate in, but also help plan for and lead. Therefore, they created a Youth Planning Team (YPT) facilitated by an intermediary, Center for Youth and Community Leadership in Education (CYCLE). Youth from each grantee organization were selected to participate through an application process. Importantly, these representatives received stipends to engage in multiple virtual and in-person meetings to develop content for YLI. The YPT influenced the 2014 agenda by adding workshops on restorative justice, student voice, and agency in teacher evaluations. They were also instrumental in creating interactive, fun activities such as a “walking charades tournament,” an open mic night, and a media room to share YLI experiences during transitions and free time. However, NMEF was still driving the goals and objectives, with the expressed desire to have multiple workshops and poster sessions focused on SCL and college and career readiness.

YLI 2014 engaged approximately 120 youth including the YPT and young people from five school districts and six ASVL grantees (each bringing between four and six young people) who were deeply engaged and excited to learn from one another. This YLI cemented NMEF’s commitment to bringing

young people together to discuss key issues important in their lives and education, which concurrently opened up concerns about the relevance of SCL in the lives of youth, especially youth of color. NMEF’s program officer was committed to holding space for these critical conversations, while representing the foundation’s views and its theory of change.

2015 YLI marked a significant change in YLI. While NMEF’s goals remained front and center, young people on the YPT deepened their influence over the agenda.

Young people’s continued desire to discuss identity, race, and culture led to inviting Dr. Leigh Patel to deliver an opening keynote about social location. Social location is defined as the social position an individual holds within their society and is based upon social characteristics deemed to be important by any given society. Dr. Patel discussed the historical nature of social location and its systemic impact on the dominant culture in the United States. This talk framed the two-day agenda of workshops and dialogues. An “identity room”—an interactive space for

[In the 2015 YLI], there was a huge culture shift in the energy for the work. The youth planning team started to bring up the fact that we were not talking about identity. The idea for the “identity room” came from the youth planning team. Really introducing to NMEF the notion that if you don’t look at race equity, you will never get SCL.

– CYCLE Staff



youth and adults to respond to provocative images and text— was also created and facilitated engaging real-time and virtual conversations about issues of equity and inclusion.

However, there remained a “linguistic dance” around NMEF’s definition of SCL and the young people’s understanding of how schools should put their cultures, their ethnicities, and their life experiences at the center. The concept of SCL was distinct and disconnected from youth-driven issues and conversations. To many, it seemed as though there were two sets of conference goals and agendas – one led by NMEF and the other by the YPT.

YLI 2015 evaluations, along with subsequent reflections by the YPT, CYCLE, and NMEF, revealed more about the promotion of authentic youth voice and leadership. It also made clear that some adults were very advanced in their efforts while others were still struggling to create spaces for youth voice. The role of the adult within YLI was called into question, with some who saw themselves as mere chaperones, while others saw themselves as allies, facilitators and trainers. There were also vast differences in the ways in which adults related to young people and worked to build relationships with them.

As the NMEF program officer planned for and participated in YLI, she gained a greater understanding of adultism and what it meant as a funder to truly amplify youth voices in marginalized communities and schools. She noted that activities and conversations during the 2015 YLI made it “immediately clear that we needed to begin to deal with issues of race and equity. As we reflected, we realized the need to listen to youth and let their interests lead the conversation.”

Coming out of the 2015 YLI, everyone was excited by its potential and eager to scale the work. Therefore, the **2016 YLI** was held at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, a larger venue, and

YLI has made a huge impact on me. I was able to explore my personal identity and career choices — getting out of my bubble was life changing.

– YPT Member

I was exposed to other cultures through YLI, and I felt prideful and accepted for having the same or different opinions. It reassured me, empowered me that it's a movement, that I am not alone.

– YPT Member

the event nearly doubled in size and scope. In addition, there was a strategic attempt to bring more teachers into the fold, to garner their support for youth voice. A Teacher Planning Team (TPT) was developed to help unearth and meet the specific needs of adults attending the conference, with the explicit goal of building their capacities as allies.

However, according to CYCLE, NMEF, and participants this was “the least successful YLI” because it engaged too many adults with emerging views and capacities related to authentic youth partnership. The adults’ limited capacity, and in some cases, lack of desire to change, fundamentally shifted the dynamics of YLI toward building adult capacity. Far from de-escalating the clashes in style and values between adults that arose in 2015,

it exacerbated them. The vast gulf that stood between priorities of youth organizers, adult allies, the foundation, and the educators in the room became more pronounced in a forum with new and diverse participants.

While 2016 was fraught with lessons, it also helped NMEF realize they needed to embrace the strategies that grantees were effectively implementing in the communities that mattered most to the foundation’s mission. The foundation deepened their recognition that SCL, as NMEF articulated it, was in conflict with grantees’ everyday realities. This marked a giant step along the path of NMEF’s journey, de-emphasizing the promotion of SCL and moving from strategic philanthropy to more responsive philanthropy. These experiences also influenced the findings of a 2016 foundation-wide equity assessment that resulted in pausing the SCL-focused strategy.

In an effort to give more control and leadership to youth organizers and grantee partners, NMEF shifted much of the decision-making and management to CYCLE. CYCLE was described by many interviewees as skillful facilitators and masterful at participatory planning, implementation, and post-conference debrief processes. Their ability to create a safe space for young people, grantees, and the foundation to have honest, and often difficult, conversations yielded great trust between the stakeholders and fostered learning at every level — youth, adults, and the foundation.

By **2017**, YLI was a two-and-a-half day event, with explicit goals of developing young people’s skills and knowledge around organizing, youth voice, and leadership, with an explicit focus on advancing race equity. All workshops were designed and led by young people and topics included:

- We’ll Lead That! Equitable Structures for our Leadership in Pittsfield Schools;
- Who Are Youth? Exploring Identity in Education; and
- Organizing for Our Rights! Changing School Discipline Policies in Boston.

Driven by the YPT, YLI 2017 focused on creating collaborative and cross-organizational learning spaces, empowering participants to take what they learned back to their home communities to create change. More explicit conversations, workshops, and trainings focused on issues of race, privilege, and oppression, especially in the context of assuring that all students in New England had access to high quality education that would make them college and career ready. In addition, district grantees were not required to attend, and only those adults with a strong desire and ability to scale the work in their local communities participated. In fact, YLI is currently by invitation only, assuring that all of those in attendance truly want to learn and work together to amplify youth voice. Since 2017 the focus has largely remained the same, with variations on content based upon grantee organizing strategies and campaigns. And in 2018, NMEF gave the full budget for YLI to CYCLE to completely shape and own the event, alongside the YPT. NMEF's role has now fully shifted from driver and influencer to true partner and ally.

THE IMPACT OF YOUTH LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

Since 2013, YLI has engaged a total of 1,252 participants (791 young people and 461 adults).⁶ Regardless of their background or exposure, all participants reported four important outcomes of YLI's over the years: 1) building relationships and networks that connected young

people and adult allies working to improve education in New England; 2) shifting adult practices with youth; 3) igniting new actions and collective campaigns; and 4) promoting positive youth development.

1) Building Relationships and Networks

All interviewees reported that the relationships developed across YLI organizations and amongst individual young people have been the most important outcome, igniting new conversations about education and racial equity and creating more solidarity and less isolation. These connections were seen as critical because prior to YLI, there weren't connections across groups, especially in more rural areas, and now there is a rich conversation about youth organizing in the region—amongst youth groups, within schools, across districts, and within the funding community.

(Youth organizing is a triple bottom line investment: you get an issue benefit, you get a community benefit, and you get a leadership development benefit for young people (Shah, S. et. al January 2018).

YLI is about the relationships that are developed across organizations and across individual young people. The relationships and solidarity in this work have grown every year. For example, we now see a group in Boston and one in Maine working on the same thing. It is about nurturing the relationships formed at YLI and beyond.

– CYCLE Staff

YLI is a way to empower young people and allow them to gather more context for the work they are doing, and it was helpful for young people to know that they are not isolated in doing this work. YLI is important for young people to build connections and meet other youth organizers.

– Adult Ally of Youth Organizing Group

Through these new connections, youth organizers galvanized support from one another and worked on similar issues and campaigns. For example, Hearing Youth Voices (New London, CT) and Providence Student Union (Providence, RI) first met and ignited their relationships at YLI. Now they meet regularly, share resources, and support one another with actions and strategies. Young Voices and Providence Student Union also connect and partner with one another regularly. In addition, Pittsfield Listens and Youth in Action meet to discuss systemic issues of race, privilege, and oppression.



2) Taking Action and Making Change

YLI has influenced a number of strong collaborations and actions that have created more equity in school funding, supported restorative justice models in schools and across districts, increased efforts to support college and career readiness, and created sustained leadership opportunities for young people in their education (See Table 1). It has also resulted in the creation of the New England Youth Organizing Network (NEYON), a new collaboration of youth-led organizing groups building a strong, youth-led movement for social justice. NEYON is intentionally connecting youth-led organizing groups to each other across New England to build power, and connect and amplify the work happening in communities, so that young people have more power to engage as experts and leaders in pursuit of education justice.⁷

Table 1: List of Campaigns and Actions Influenced by YLI

Equity in School Funding	Restorative Justice	Youth Voice	College & Career Readiness
<p>Inspired by the YLI workshop session “School Build on Equity in School Funding,” youth in Pittsfield Listens scaled the work by running 40 workshops with 200 students, staff, and school board members. They gathered data about school funding, teacher retention, and quality and shared with community members in order to advocate for student representation on the school board.</p>	<p>Several ASVL grantees ran effective restorative justice campaigns that were influenced by one another and conversations at YLI, resulting in changes to school policy in one New London, Connecticut high school and across school districts in Providence, Rhode Island and Manchester, New Hampshire. Awareness campaigns about the importance of restorative justice in schools also took place in two schools in Pittsfield, Massachusetts and in Lewiston, Maine.</p>	<p>YLI ignited multiple initiatives and actions to embed more youth voice in decision-making related to educational policies and practices. Three grantees have worked to create permanent, sustained youth voice within local school/district decision-making bodies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A permanent position for a student representative on the New London Board of Education’s Policy Committee; • Providence Student Union members now represent youth voice in an ongoing working group to develop annual curriculum content; • Youth serve on Climate & Culture committees at three Rhode Island high schools, and represent youth voice at Providence’s SCL Leadership Table. 	<p>Two campaigns about college and career readiness were also launched in Burlington, Vermont and Sanford, Maine based on discussions at YLI. Vermont youth advocated and won a campaign to create a youth-led advisory group that focuses on college readiness and Sanford conducted a youth participatory action research project that unearthed critical information about factors underpinning young people’s ability to become college and career ready in Maine.</p>

One girl when she first started, she was the quietest person ...once she got in YLI, she is now so vocal, she wants to be a therapist to help people, she suddenly saw herself as an agent of change. YLI opened the door of possibilities for them.

– Youth Organizer

places young people's personal stories and interests at the center by truly prioritizing and valuing their experiences, it creates a unique web of supportive relationships and a sense of belonging that has been proven to develop young organizers' social and emotional skills and increase their critical consciousness (Flores 2017; Ginwright

YLI helped to create a culture in my school for youth voice. It was this sort of abstract concept that we all wanted to get to — teachers and students alike — and YLI was a good steppingstone to getting to that goal. It helped students to see the benefits of non-traditional education and helped change teacher and administrator perspectives. This is the power of youth and this is what a collaboration of youth as equals can be — which made a big impact on my school.

– YPT Youth Member

3) Promoting Positive Youth Development

When interviewing adult allies, young people, and funders about YLI, all highlighted the profound impact on young participants. It was reported that youth who participated in YLI expanded their positive identity and sense of self, becoming more confident and taking greater positive risks. By taking time to build relationships across racial/ethnic/class groups, YLI has contributed to broader perspectives about difference that has led to an expanded awareness and acceptance of self and others. In addition, both young people and adult allies reported how YLI shifted participants' career and college paths and their desire to continue working in the social sector.

Because the overall approach to youth organizing is fundamentally relational and places young people's personal stories and interests at the center by truly prioritizing and valuing their experiences, it creates a unique web of supportive relationships and a sense of belonging that has been proven to develop young organizers' social and emotional skills and increase their critical consciousness (Flores 2017; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, 2007; Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). These types of skills are important because they rival academic or technical skills in predicting employment, future earnings, and academic success (Kautz, et al. 2014).

Many have taken these skills into college, making them more confident in themselves, and to take bigger risks in their education. Students who were struggling in school felt seen and heard at this conference, I saw a benefit to their overall lives.

– Teacher

4) Shifting Adult Practices

The varying levels of adult expertise and enthusiasm have shaped the overall impact of YLI on adults and their practices. **Adults with limited experience in youth organizing** reported learning how to structure more meaningful participation with young people. They noted finding the right balance between learning, leading, sharing, and facilitating with young people. These adults became aware that authentic youth voice required

new ways of working and soon became advocates. For example, one adult ally who was also a city council member had never heard about youth participatory budgeting, so he made it a point to take this concept to his colleagues and is now pushing for this process in his city.

Adults with experience as youth allies and partners felt that YLI was a “good refresher” and allowed them the time and space necessary to develop networks and learn new techniques and activities from peers. They enjoyed making new professional connections, and in many cases these relationships continued beyond the conference.

I learned about intersectionality, how to bring discussions of race and racism to my content. YLI gave me the language and confidence to approach and do a whole unit on African American studies in this 98% white school. Usually white teachers don't feel comfortable doing this, but I had a grounding through YLI and got there.

– Adult Ally

I loved watching and learning from the youth, watching them own the space. I took away processes and practices to take back to my school and use in my classroom. Student teacher evaluations was a workshop I attended, it made me more aware of ways of getting feedback from my students.

– Adult Ally

No matter their background, all adults reported gaining new language and skills for talking about issues of race and racism in education and felt more comfortable igniting new conversations with other adults. This is a critical impact, as many of the adults had no previous skills in this area.

CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS

The impact of YLI has expanded over time and endures for many of the young people who have gained critical social and emotional skills, increased their critical consciousness, become more civically engaged, and shifted their college and career paths to include social justice and equity. It has ignited new conversations, campaigns, and actions that connect young people and adults as they work to improve education in New England. What started as an effort to

build school district capacity for community and youth engagement is now a successful youth-led convening that provides space to raise questions about power and take collective action to change the rules to make education more fair and powerful.

Reaching more than 1,200 participants of diverse cultural, racial, gender, economic and geographic backgrounds, YLI has provided young people with the time and space to build their collective power and lift up critical questions and concerns for the foundation, as NMEF examines their own power and privilege, and the ways they related to youth. These “dialogues” played an important part in transforming NMEF and the way it partners with young people.

Funding to benefit under-resourced communities inevitably raises questions of power. Improving the lives of those on the downside of power necessarily entails increasing their own agency and ability to change the rules to better reflect their needs and interests, which ultimately benefits all of us. It also entails re-examining the ways funders use their own power and privileged status, and the ways they relate to marginalized communities.

– National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy

Establishing YPT was a key strategy for sharing and building power, ultimately helping to reframe the narrative about education equity and justice at YLI. However, the authentic participation of young people required thoughtful attention and support. From the moment that NMEF and CYCLE invited youth to engage on the YPT, they started a journey filled with opportunities to learn and grow. We hope that the following insights will help others sidestep these difficulties with grace and dignity. The lessons fall into two distinct categories: 1) for anyone hosting youth-led meetings or convenings; 2) for funders who want to effectively engage young people through meetings or convenings.



Lessons on Convening Youth-Led Meetings

ENGAGING YPT MEMBERS



Lesson #1 Foster Strong Youth/Adult Partnerships from the Start. Make sure that each young person applying to be part of the convening, or in this case to participate on the YPT, has an adult sponsor from the very start. This person will act as a key contact, assuring young people complete applications fully and on-time, helping young people arrange technology to participate in virtual meetings, arranging all travel, and acting as chaperons when necessary. The buy-in and engagement of adult sponsors is critical, not only for assisting young people with the logistics of participation, but also for providing ongoing encouragement and backing for the work.



Lesson #2 Don't Underestimate the Power of the Digital Divide. When engaging young people virtually, consider the digital divide. Young people will need access to computers, tablets, and broadband internet access to support video conferencing. Purchasing hotspots may be necessary.



Lesson #3 Balance In-Person and Virtual Meetings. While virtual meetings can be a great way to save time and resources, young people have difficulty making connections with one another during conference calls and/or online meetings. This is especially true when unknown adults are involved. Therefore, it is important to bring young people together with adult allies so that they get to know one another and build trust. Creating in-person safe spaces from the start will pave the way for effective virtual meetings throughout the planning process and give young people greater confidence to share their thoughts and opinions.



Lesson #4 Engage Strong Facilitators of Youth Voice. Hire well-trained, paid facilitators with experience in youth voice to lead virtual and in-person planning sessions. In particular, assure facilitators have the skills necessary to address adultism and break down barriers that often stand between youth and adults. Some techniques included: working to collectively set and use meeting norms, carving out specific space on the agenda that is youth-led, and throughout the meeting encouraging adults to step back to listen and learn from young people.



Lesson #5 Let Youth Leadership Shine. Engaging young people on planning teams for convenings is a great step along the way to promoting authentic youth voice. However, don't forget to provide them with meaningful leadership roles and responsibilities during the event itself. Be sure that youth are engaged as speakers, workshop leaders, facilitators, etc.

Fostering Youth-Adult Partnership

The role of adults at YLI has continued to be a confounding element. From the very start there have been a wide variety of adults from various backgrounds holding very different values about youth partnership and voice. These include: NMEF staff, CYCLE Staff, paid trained facilitators and speakers, teachers, district leaders, chaperones, and event and paid staff who have helped to run the event. While some had strong skills and abilities to partner with young people, acting as allies, others have no experience at all. Each brought their own unique perspectives about and set of responsibilities related to youth safety.



Lesson #6 Be Extra Sensitive to Cultural Norms and Values. Across the board, teachers and district employees are responsible, by law, for young people's safety and want to abide by those rules and regulations in all settings. These practices run counter to youth organizers' values related to adultism and can cause a culture clash. Both points of view are valid, yet difficult to navigate. Develop a clear set of norms and rules prior to the event and be sure that all adults are briefed on the roles and expectations for adults, especially as they relate to young people's behaviors.



Lesson #7 Engage Adults Who Can Help Young People Take Learnings Back Home. Be sure to engage adults who are interested in becoming adult allies, those that truly want to foster greater youth voice and leadership within their school, class, program, or organization. Make sure that there are either existing structures for young people to implement learnings from YLI in the local context, or that the adults have the authority to begin creating these types of supportive environments.



Lesson #8 Create Meaningful Spaces for Adults to Learn. Create space for adult learning and development. While the young people are engaged in workshops and trainings, it is important to engage adults. Take time to work with adults who are newer to the concept of youth-adult partnership, providing them with training and workshops to help develop their skills. Assure that those with more advanced capacities have time to network and learn from one another, potentially crafting collective campaigns and actions.

Lessons for Funders Supporting Youth Voice



Tip #1 Build Power with Grantees and Youth. Building power can be accomplished by funding and supporting youth organizing groups and/or youth led programs and activities. However, this work can be amplified by bringing grantees together to foster cross-cutting learnings, campaigns, and actions. It also allows foundations to seize on opportunities to promote greater impact within a geographic region or issue area. The amplified voices of youth through YLI assured that NMEF continued to hear and learn directly from young people. And NMEF is clear that they are not done learning, and that youth are not yet equal partners.



Tip #2 Ensure Adequate Time and Resources for Power Sharing. Sharing power is a complex and an ongoing process that needs attention and care at every level – between youth and adults, between grantees and funders, between foundation staff and intermediary support staff, and amongst foundation staff. Take time to build relationships and create safe spaces to question power dynamics along the way—from planning, to implementation, to final reflections. Indeed, the process of creating the convening is just as important as the event itself—assuring that authentic voice is practiced in every interaction.



Tip #3 Build Strong Relationships with a Strong Intermediary Organization.

It is a critical that both the foundation staff and intermediary staff (trainings, facilitators) possess the skills and sensitivities needed to relate authentically and engage in courageous conversations. From the outset, specific attention should be given to the process of sharing power and how the Foundation and intermediary will work together. The intermediary is the bridge between the foundation and the grantees, providing a safe space for open dialogue, learning, and innovation to occur outside of traditional structures and power dynamics inherent in these relationships. When done well, they can help to translate the foundation's needs into language and actions that are grounded in grantees' realities.

This relationship sets the culture for the rest of the initiatives; therefore, spend time building a solid foundation of trust that allows both parties to grow and evolve the work together. Honest and difficult dialogues about power and power sharing, accompanied by critical reflection, help to hold the center of the work, while pushing the boundaries of understanding for the foundation, the intermediary, the grantees, and the young people.



Tip #4 Listen and Remain Flexible and Responsive. At the center of this work is the ability to listen across differences, and then take action. The foundation's ability to listen is key, and staff must remain flexible and responsive to the voices of young people. When in the room with young people, foundation staff need to take a posture of learning, considering their unique views, experiences, and perspectives and asking thoughtful questions for deeper understanding. While foundation staff hold their institutional goals and values, they need to remain committed to authentic youth voice and take youth perspectives very seriously. This commitment helped NMEF examine their own power and privilege and played an important part in the foundation's leadership transforming NMEF and its stance on equity and inclusion.



Tip #5 Use Your Power for Good. Foundations have an enormous amount of power and can work in support of their grantees, holding funder convenings, writing papers, giving talks to highlight the work, creating support campaigns and actions, and growing the field of youth voice and leadership. In 2019, NMEF held their first funders convening at YLI, inviting others from New England to learn more about youth organizing and YLI's impact. This initial convening and the ongoing dialogues that continue to this day have built attention and support for YLI, youth organizing overall, and specific youth-led campaigns and action. Where possible, foundations should use their power to bring folks together to further youth voice and leadership.



A NOTE FROM THE NELLIE MAE EDUCATION FOUNDATION

These hard-earned lessons are the fruit of seven years of our best efforts to welcome and increasingly honor youth voice at NMEF. They were not expected outcomes from the beginning, but instead, truths that revealed themselves overtime. We are now able to hold these up against our original goals and notice the tensions and the contradictions. It was important to bring these to light so that we could notice what was happening in communities and realize that the contradictions were not mistakes, but instead a reality test for our goals. At the beginning, we did not expect the disparities between our views and the young people's realities would be so great, or that noticing them would take us down a path toward examining racial equity and inclusion, but we are glad it has. This evaluation of YLI is one part of a larger foundation learning initiative that has allowed us to step back from our aspirations in order to become more grounded in the realities in our communities. Findings from these studies coupled with ongoing community reflection have helped recognize the need to grow our collective compassion and humility so that we can become better grantmakers and philanthropists. We are grateful to our teachers on this journey: the youth who have spoken their truth; the allies and educators who have supported youth as best they could, and who have been willing to be learners alongside us; and to our colleagues at CYCLE who have built their own capacities along the way in order to become increasingly better bridge builders, and developers of a platform where youth can speak to and advocate for their truths. We also are grateful to our evaluation partners at Algorithm who have modeled the reality that data can be power to speak truth and advance equity. We know that our learning is incomplete; youth are not yet equal partners and we are still learning about where to step up and where to step back. Yet we hope our lessons can save others some time and energy, and that they give cause for new conversations about how to advance youth organizing within and beyond New England.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Center for Youth and Community Leadership in Education (CYCLE) <https://cycle-rwu.org/new-england-youth-organizing-network>
- 2 National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. Power Moves: Your essential philanthropy assessment guide for equity and justice.
- 3 Supporting Youth Organizing: A tale of unexpected insights. <https://www.nmefoundation.org/resources/supporting-youth-organizing-a-tale-of-unexpected-insights/>
- 4 Building Power: One foundation's story of funding grassroots organizing and engagement. <https://www.nmefoundation.org/resources/building-power-one-foundations-story-of-funding-grassroots-organizing-and-engagement/>
- 5 Levin, A. Datnow, and N. Carrier (March 2012). Changing School District Practices. The Students at the Center Series.
- 6 Note: these numbers include duplicated youth and adults who have attended YLI multiple times.
- 7 Cycle Website. <https://cycle-rwu.org/new-england-youth-organizing-network>



